Running Cover for Death: Pandemic Minimizers Normalize an Inhumane Baseline

July 24, 2023 (https://blog.petrieflom.law.harvard.edu/2023/07/24/running-cover-for-death-pandemic-minimizers-normalize-an-inhumane-baseline/) Nate Holdren (https://blog.petrieflom.law.harvard.edu/author/nholdren/) Bioethics (https://blog.petrieflom.law.harvard.edu/category/bioethics/), Health Law Policy (https://blog.petrieflom.law.harvard.edu/category/health-law-policy/), History (https://blog.petrieflom.law.harvard.edu/category/history/), Personal Responsibility (https://blog.petrieflom.law.harvard.edu/category/personal-responsibility-for-health/), Philosophy (https://blog.petrieflom.law.harvard.edu/category/philosophy-2/), Population-Level Bioethics (https://blog.petrieflom.law.harvard.edu/category/bioethics/population-level-bioethics-bioethics/), Public Health (https://blog.petrieflom.law.harvard.edu/category/public-health/), Race (https://blog.petrieflom.law.harvard.edu/category/race/), Resource Allocation (https://blog.petrieflom.law.harvard.edu/category/resource-allocation/), Social Determinants of Health (https://blog.petrieflom.law.harvard.edu/category/social-determinants-of-health/)

By Nate Holdren

Last week, David Leonhardt took to the pages of the *New York Times* to celebrate the latest COVID death figures (https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/17/briefing/covid.html), which he claims mean

the U.S. is no longer in a pandemic, because there are no more "excess deaths."

The hunger for good news is, of course, understandable amid this ongoing nightmare. But to respond to death with "smile everyone, it could have been more deaths!" is grotesque because of the disrespect to the dead and those most affected by the deaths.

It also lets the powerful off the hook, which is Leonhardt's primary motivation, I assume. In other words, looking for good news is a political position.

The sociologist Goran Therborn has argued (https://www.versobooks.com/products/1089-the-ideology-of-power-and-the-power-of-ideology) that ideology is always a matter of assertions about what exists, what is possible, and what is just. Leonhardt (I'd call him Lyin' Heart, but it seems wrong to imply he has a heart) and other ideologues like him start from the position that the Biden Administration has succeeded, and they fold assertions about what exists (few deaths! and only among nobodies!), what is possible (nothing more than what has already been done!), and what is just (Biden is good! Masking is bad, so is work from home, aren't you TIRED of all the RESTRICTIONS!?), in order to create a depiction of policy success. There is no level of contorted reasoning they won't engage in. It would be funny if it weren't so ghastly.

We should resist the temptation to respond to death and injury by looking for ways to say the present level of death is better than some counterfactual. Unless COVID deaths are genuinely at zero, no level of death is actually good news, it's just the absence of even worse news. It's especially important to not get pulled into calling a number of deaths "better" when we know that the government, employers, and other powerful institutional actors have chosen to let preventable infections, and thus some avoidable COVID deaths, just happen. In the face of all this, we must remain critical, insist on identifying the terrible shortcomings of the powerful, and demand far more for all those harmed by the continuing disaster of the pandemic.

Smarter people than me have criticized Leonhardt's deceptions, and I recommend those criticisms to readers, such as those of Justin Feldman (http://blog.petrieflom.law.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/ThreadReader_0_jfeldman_epi_1681132480848355328.pdf). I just want to note a few additional things. First of all, a critical thinker would point out that COVID death figures remain too high, rather than search for a reason to say the current death figures are reason to party. I would, of course, never say Dave was either critical or a thinker, let alone both — I would instead say the *Times* has a problem of excess Leonhardt.

But back to correcting his deceptions. Let us not forget that *all* COVID deaths are in excess of the pre-pandemic normal. To point at excess deaths and say that now they are lower than they could have been under certain hypothetical conditions is to turn the concept of excess deaths into yet another device to aid the powerful in dodging responsibility. The concept of excess deaths has real critical force for helping identify how things are *worse* than they could have been, such that action must be taken. To reverse that, and to say that now things are *better*, at a time when COVID deaths still continue is an attempt to urge further inaction; in other words, to get people to care

even less than they already do about COVID deaths. This rhetorical move by Leonhardt reminds me of the writer Walter Benjamin's aphorism (https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm) that "not even the dead will be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious." Before experiencing the pandemic and its minimizers, I used to think that sounded a little over the top.

A hostile reader would no doubt respond that Zero COVID is impossible, urging that we must learn to live with the virus, which is to say, learn to stop caring about anyone killed or otherwise harmed. Ghouls like that want us to forget that the only ethical response to the pandemic is to make the maximum possible effort to prevent harms. Some people argue that preventive measures can become intense enough that they do more harm than COVID — the cure worse than the disease, as the cliché goes. I'm skeptical, but in any case, we have never been anywhere near that point during the pandemic.

In any case, *if* there is a line where prevention measures should stop because they become harmful, such a line is a political one: a matter of values and analysis, to be deliberated upon and determined democratically. We have had no such politicking in the pandemic. Instead, the government, aided by its nihilist flunkies like Leonhardt (https://blog.petrieflom.law.harvard.edu/2022/09/19/pandemic-nihilism-social-murder-and-the-banality-of-evil/), has sought over and over again to avoid politics (https://blog.petrieflom.law.harvard.edu/2022/03/21/depoliticizing-social-murder-covid-pandemic/) about the pandemic, treating it as something natural and inevitable for which no one is responsible and about which nothing can be done — after all, if nothing excessive is happening, then there's no need to do anything. It's a rhetorical move that tries to get people to believe that everything that could be done to prevent COVID harms has been done, such that there's nothing more that could or should be done and there's no responsibility on the part of the government. And, crucially, the point of the rhetoric is to get people to come to believe all of that without anyone ever having to present an argument to that effect. It's a deeply manipulative kind of writing that belongs more in advertising and infotainment than in serious journalism.

Finally, the concept of excess deaths itself has some limitations. That is, in thinking about excess deaths, we must resist the normalization of the baseline. We know society is hierarchical and unequal (https://www.laborarts.org/collections/item.cfm%3Fitemid=428.html); we know health is socially determined; we know those two facts combine such that the most vulnerable, least powerful members of our society die younger and in larger numbers than people above them in the food chain. That reality is outrageous; the pandemic is an especially intense and nightmarish example of that reality. In measuring the specific additional deaths added by a particular bad set of events, we should not let our focus on those additional deaths make us numb to the other deaths, the ones that are not "excess."

Instead of following Leonhardt's urging to applaud a non-zero number of deaths, when we strongly feel our need for good news, we should focus on activist efforts to push back against the imposition of COVID harms. That kind of good news reminds us the pandemic is political and

contested by people acting out values of solidarity, and reminds us we have at least some degree of power through collective action. That's bad news to people — and I use the term loosely — like Leonhardt, who prefer a docile population that can be pushed into the ballot box, workplace, woodchipper, whatever.

Against the Leonhardts of the world, and the institutional decisionmakers like Biden who they exist to serve (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1nBx-37c3c8), we must insist on starting with the view that in a capitalist, racist, sexist society the conditions of our and our loved ones' lives and deaths are political and inhumane, and that the powerful should be held to account for the ways they facilitate those harms. Of course Leonhardt would never recognize this, due to both character defects and the fact that he's well paid to help people with blood on their hands to have an undeserved easy sleep. This is why Leonhardt should be treated as the opponent of justice that he is, working to comfort the comfortable and afflict the afflicted. His words, and those of his ilk, should be read critically, rather than credulously, which means identifying his distortions, inaccuracies, and omissions, and also being careful to maintain a critical distance from his attempt to reframe our basic understanding of the pandemic.

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